

Isn't It Time We Talked About It?

Award-winning journalist Bill Moyers examines the growing movement to improve end-of-life care in America in a new four-part series, *On Our Own Terms: Moyers on Dying*, which airs September 10–13 at 9 p.m. The programs are followed by *With Eyes Open at 10:30 p.m.*, a series of discussions led by Frank Ostaseski of San Francisco's Zen Hospice Center and The NewsHour's Ray Suarez on topics related to death and end-of-life care.

BY SUE LYN SCHRAMM

How do you begin to talk about dying? Our youth-worshipping culture refuses to discuss the subject, and many of us seem happy to pretend that death will never happen to us or to our loved ones. But that denial robs us of the chance to make the inevitable end-of-life process less traumatic. Indeed, other cultures see potential joy as well as grief in the passage. Perhaps we can too, if we're not afraid to reach out to each other.

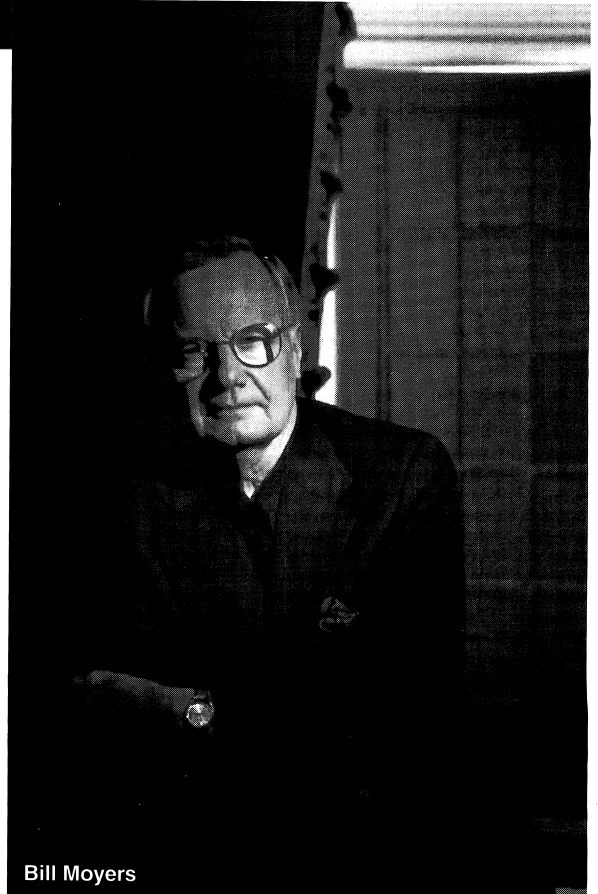
Working at a hospice, as I do, gives one a unique perspective on the way in which individuals face death. Our patients all know that their time is limited. They make the most of it. Watching them use that time to communicate with their families and reach spiritual peace has been a revelation to me. After the death of a patient who ended his life at home surrounded by his family, one of our nurses spoke of her respect for him. "He ate from the garden he grew," she said. "His daughters loved him and were glad to be with him at the end."

Although a majority of people say they hope to die at home in familiar surroundings with their loved ones nearby, most of us still die in hospitals and nursing homes. Although our culture values control and choice, many patients say they fear losing control over the end of their lives and suffering a death they never would have wanted. Families often struggle through the death of a loved one without adequate support at this time of crisis.

All that is changing, however. Beginning with the hospice movement in the 1970s and continuing with the development of palliative

care as a recognized medical specialty, we are on the cusp of a new era in end-of-life care. Many liken the current environment to the beginning of the childbirth reform movement of 10 to 15 years ago, when consumer demand forced improvements in the health-care system. The result was a more humanized childbirth experience with family-friendly delivery options and better care for both mother and baby. Now, advocates are trying to do for the end of life what was done for the beginning: to treat dying as a natural event while offering the highest quality of care possible under modern medicine.

In *On Our Own Terms: Moyers on Dying*, veteran journalist Bill Moyers examines the palliative-care movement. He tells the stories of real people with terminal illnesses — and the choices and decisions they face — in the hope of sparking a dialogue on these important issues, both within families and around the nation. Americans have said repeatedly that they want to maintain the highest possible quality of life for as long as possible and then face death as a natural event, without unnecessary pain or suffering. Physicians, patients and families are working to achieve this kind of peace, and *On Our Own Terms* paints a moving and frequently uplifting picture of what a better death might look like for all of us. ▲



Bill Moyers

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The Washington Metro area has a growing coalition of health-care providers and citizens devoted to improving end-of-life care in our community — contact SOLACE: Supporters of Life-Affirming Care at End of Life, at 703-538-0810.

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